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TV: U.S. Intelligence and the Klaus Barbie Case

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KLAUS BARBIE: The American Connection" looks at the postwar involvement of United States intelligence officials with the man who was called the "Butcher of Lyons." That there was such an involvement is certain; that Klaus Barbie committed monstrous crimes is certain, too. The question is whether the American agents were morally culpable in dealing with, even protecting, the former Gestapo officer. "Klaus Barbie," a "Frontline" documentary, suggests they were. The documentary will be shown on Channel 13 at 8 o'clock tonight.

In fact, it is hard to condone, difficult to defend and impossible to praise the American connection with Mr. Barbie. From 1942 through 1944 he was the head of the Gestapo in Lyons, France. After the war he was a paid informant for the Army Counter Intelligence Corps. When the French attempted to arrest him for war crimes, American agents thwarted them, and in 1951 they smuggled Mr. Barbie out of Europe. Last February, he was extradited from Bolivia to France. He

will be tried there for "crimes against humanity."

The documentary, meanwhile, supplies ample evidence of Mr. Barbie's outrages. Jessica Savitch, the narrator, exaggerates when she says he

headed a unit responsible "for the deaths of perhaps 20,000 Frenchmen" — the French themselves cite lower figures — but it is clear he is a monster. In one moving interview, a woman talks of being beaten by Mr. Barbie for five days when she was 13 years old. In another interview, a man says that Mr. Barbie enjoyed causing pain.

Interspersed with this and similar interviews are interviews with former American intelligence agents, who try to explain their association with the former Gestapo officer: he was a competent professional; he was useful in spying on the Russians. It is clear, however, that the moral case, as we see it in the documentary, is against them.

The documentary, which was produced by the BBC, is extraordinarily sure of itself in this, and sometimes it is self-righteous. In one interview, a BBC reporter confronts a former agent and questions him at length about the morality of using old Gestapo officers as informants. Eventually she gets the former agent where she wants him.

"Are you saying that you were just obeying orders?" the BBC reporter asks.

"I was just obeying orders," he says.

His answer, of course, resonates with echoes from Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem. Away with all distinctions. The famous Nazi murderer and the former American agent are as one. In fact, the former agent, who denies in the interview that he knew of the atrocities Mr. Barbie had committed, was a young sergeant after the war. Europe was a scene of destruction then; it is unlikely that young sergeants were informed about very much. The BBC reporter, 35 years dis-

tant from the time, is patronizing.

In another interview, a former agent, now a professor at Wayne State University in Detroit, describes how Mr. Barbie lived while he was paid by Americans. He was made comfortable. Certainly there is something repugnant about this, although it may be made more bearable by keeping in mind what the former Gestapo officer was doing at the time. In a newspaper interview the Wayne State professor said that Mr. Barbie prepared weekly reports on other missing Nazis. He also said Mr. Barbie had provided information that indicated the Russians were working on an atomic bomb.

There are interesting moral questions here, although they are not raised in the documentary. Could the protection of Mr. Barbie, vile as he may have been, been justified if he helped to bring to trial other men equally vile? Could it have been justified, or at least explained, if it was thought, even erroneously, that information about a Soviet atomic bomb could prevent World War III?

The documentary, however, tolerates no moral ambiguities. It is insistent on a hanging. The BBC reporter asks a retired intelligence officer, now living in Maine, if he had known that Mr. Barbie tortured prisoners. The retired officer says he hadn't known and that he is "skeptical" of the reports he reads about Mr. Barbie now. The retired officer, one suspects, is telling the truth exactly as he knows it. On the other hand, the documentary, in preceding the interview with evidence that Mr. Barbie did indeed torture people has made the retired officer look at best like a fool, at worst like a liar and almost certainly a party to a cover-up. The BBC and "Frontline" are giving us a sanctimonious presentation.